DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 205 992 CS 206 547

AUTHOR Miller, Gaylier E.
TITLE A Functioning Writing Laboratory: Seven Operational Truisms.
PUB DATE May 81
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Writing Centers Association (3rd, Clarion, PA, May 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Philosophy; Higher Education; Learning Laboratories; Remedial Instruction; Student Teacher Relationship; *Teacher Attitudes; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Writing Laboratories

ABSTRACT

A seven-point philosophy for operating a writing laboratory has achieved positive results, both in the form of student test scores and grades and in the form of student gratitude. The first philosophical point is a sincere, unswaying belief that "everyone" can learn to write and that only a poorly written paper is hopeless, not the student who wrote it. This attitude carries over into the second point, that self-concept is directly related to learning. A writing lab instructor's positive attitude will enhance a student's self-esteem, thus building his or her confidence in writing. The third point is that a pleasant environment facilitates learning. This means that even on a minimal budget, everything possible should be done to make the writing lab comfortable and relaxing. The fourth point is that learning to write is more like climbing a mountain than seeing a vision. Writing is learned one step at a time, not all at once, and it is a time consuming process. During that process, simple organization and quiet efficiency, the fifth point, will facilitate learning. This entails continually reorganizing materials and modifying the program to meet the students' needs. The sixth point is that individuals are different and so are their problems and needs. Finally, a committed belief that teaching writing is worthwhile will yield positive results. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED205992

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

A FUNCTIONING WRITING LABORATORY: SEVEN OPERATIONAL TRUISIMS

Gaylier E. Miller

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Gaylier E. Miller

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS206547

A FUNCTIONING WRITING LABORATORY: SEVEN OPERATIONAL TRUISIMS

Six blind men, each having touched a different section of an elephant's anatomy, gave six widely differing descriptions of the animal. I can understand why: An elephant is simply too huge to feel all at once. Although most writing instructors hold one automatic advantage over the blind men, we suffer a distinct disadvantage, also. The object of our vision: student writing problems-- is tremendously larger and more diverse than anybody's elephant.

I have titled this presentation: "A Functioning Writing Laboratory: Seven Operational Truisms." My philosophy may well contradict that of people touching a different part of the elephant. I do not contend that our system is right; I say only that it works. It achieves positive results, both quantitative-- in the form of test scores and grades-- and qualitative in the form of smiles, thank-you's, and sometimes even hugs, valentines, candy, and flowers.

1. EVERYONE CAN LEARN TO WRITE

In Illusions, Bach says: Learning is finding out what you already know. . . . Teaching is reminding others that they know just as well as you. You are all learners. . . teachers."[1] I believe those words; everyone in my department believes those words.

When we read a practically indecipherable paper, it's vitally important that we regard only the paper hopeless, not the student who wrote the paper. This is not easy. The lab instructor must be able to look the student straight in the eyes and say, honestly, " This is a weak paper, but you can learn to write acceptable papers. You owe it to yourself to let me help you clear up your writing problems." The key is sincerity. The lab instructor must believe, evidence notwithstanding, that the student can learn to write. Else, the

student will read despair in her eyes; he will detect hopelessness in her body language and tone of voice. Operating an effective writing lab is a risky business. Every day we must risk failure. We must risk believing everyone can learn to write.

2. SELF-CONCEPT IS DIRECTLY RELATED TO LEARNING.

" I can't."

"I'm too old now!"

"I'm too stupid."

"I'm more math oriented, myself."

"I had a lousy English teacher years ago; I'll never recover."

These are all cue phrases which call for a treatment of confidence building. Studies have proven over and over again that self-concept is directly related to learning. I've even conducted some of these studies, and perhaps you have, also. Statistics themselves can be enlightening, or satisfying, or even frightening. But actually seeing the positive effect of our "confidence-building treatment" is exciting and heartwarming.

Mr. N. was a retired Veteran, about 45 years old, a native of the Philippines. He was a quiet, unassuming man, polite to the extreme, and overwhelmed by freshman English and "all these smart students in my class." He constantly put himself down. Almost every sentence began with "I can't." Mr. N. began freshman English with an F essay, but by midterm, he was making A's. His change was dramatic because all he had to learn was to believe in himself.

When we operate under the assumption that self-concept is directly related to learning, we will address the confidence problem as soon as we see it. Of course, teaching attitude is much more challenging than teaching grammar or paragraph structure. Many well informed people say it cannot be done. I choose not to believe them.

Every term we do an evaluation of our lab's effectiveness. We make our simple student opinionnaire available, and responses are anonymous and completely voluntary. The last item on our brief opinionnaire reads: " In the space below, comment on how you feel about the Writing Laboratory." I'd like to read to you a couple of responses from our spring term evaluation:

1. The staff is well chosen and extremely patient. The emphasis on meeting my needs is too good to be true. I can't believe it's free. (Notice my correct punctuation and use of apostrophe. I learned it here.)
2. I enjoy coming to the writing lab. There is a friendly and cheerful atmosphere, and the people that help seem to care.

At least 98 percent of our students say essentially the same thing. We build their self-concept by believing in them. We build our own self-concept by reading what they have to say about us.

3. A PLEASANT ENVIRONMENT FACILITATES LEARNING.

I brought slides of our Pensacola Campus Lab (we have two others) because when I say "pleasant," I want you to see what I mean. I do not mean the latest, most expensive furnishings and equipment. I do not mean that our interior decorating would win any prizes. I do mean that each desk, chair, table, bookcase, and cabinet you see is so old it was taken off inventory before 1978. When we began furnishing a bare room on a bare budget, we had only enough money for paint. So we splurged with color. We added a few green plants and they grew and we repotted and they grew. Now we have thirty-four. Often lab instructors and/or students also bring cut flowers.

Recently, two young women came into the lab for the first time. It was after hours, and ordinarily, I would have been gone. After we had talked a moment, I excused myself to answer the phone in my office close by. When I returned a short time later, one woman said, "What is it about this room? This is strange! I've been here only a few minutes, and I feel so relaxed."

"It's magic," I said. "I don't understand it either."

4. LEARNING TO WRITE IS MORE LIKE CLIMBING A MOUNTAIN THAN SEEING A VISION.

Over lunch one day, a friend at school related her mountain climbing experience in Mexico last year. She said, " I really didn't believe I was capable of climbing that mountain. But the guide kept telling me I could. It was strenuous work. I was ridiculously clumsy and uncertain. But the guide kept telling me I could do it anyway. He told me to concentrate on just one foothold at the time, and I did. I cannot explain the exhiliration I felt when I finally reached the top! I looked down and said, 'Did I do that? How in the world?'"

Writing is like climbing a mountain. We all must climb our own. (It does not matter that one person's mountain may be another's molehill.) Every term, usually near the beginning, we see a few fantacizers. They are always first-timers, not our regular students. They tend to rush in at a ten-minute class break, asking, "Will somebody read over my paper?

"When's it due?" I ask.

"Oh, I have to turn it in, in -- let's see -- exactly eight minutes."

"How did you do on your last essay?" I ask. The student is beginning to grow annoyed.

"I got a D-. Can you imagine! That's the reason I came here. Somebody told me you could fix up my paper."

I am forced to answer: "Sorry, friend. We don't perform miracles. Come back when you have more time."

5. SIMPLE ORGANIZATION AND QUIET EFFICIENCY FACILITATE LEARNING.

Organizing materials and equipment is an on-going process for us. So is the re-designing of student folders and revision of instructional materials. We modify our lab program every term. If none of the staff thinks of a way to

improve, a student suggests one. We are never, never going to be satisfied until we reach perfection.

Our operation is so smooth that we have no problem with thirty students and four instructors in the same room. Our Student Orientation tape explains our process for first-term freshmen English students:

Welcome to the PJC Writing Laboratory. We're here to help you improve your grammar, show you proper punctuation, spelling, and capitalization, and guide you in writing compositions. You may be required to attend the lab because your placement test showed weaknesses in English skills. In that case, you must regularly attend the lab section in which you are enrolled. On the other hand, you may be here as a volunteer. In that case, you may still work through our entire grammar review or just get help on special problems. Regardless of your lab status, always feel free to discuss your specific problems with the lab instructor. Now that you have enrolled in writing lab, you need to know a few things about the way we work. Every time you come in, please sign the roster right inside the door. The roster is divided into sections. Make sure you sign under the section in which you are enrolled so that we have an accurate record of your attendance. After you sign in at the beginning of each visit, get your folder from behind the first letter of your last name in one of the boxes. Turn off the tape now and go sign the roster and get your folder. Then, turn the tape on again.
Open your folder and look at the progress chart at the bottom of the page. The skills listed there are the ones you'll be working on throughout the term. These are the same skills that are covered in ENC 1103. In the column marked DATE, you should write down when you start the first skill: SV id. That's subject-verb identification. When you and the lab instructor feel you have mastered that skill, you take a test. You record the results of the test in the next column. Then write down the date you completed the skill. If you keep this running account of your progress, both you and the lab instructor know exactly how much you have accomplished in the lab and what you should be working on during your lab visits. Next to the boxes of folders, you'll see a bookcase of mimeographed exercises. Notice the plastic dividers that separate the skills we cover in our grammar review. You should now go over to the bookcase and locate the first plastic divider. It says, SUBJECTS AND VERBS on it. Take one of the stapled packets from the first folder behind the divider and return to your seat. Turn off the tape and go get your subject-verb packet. Ready to go to work? Okay. As soon as you finish listening to this tape, read the packet and do all the exercises you are asked to do. If you have any questions about the exercises, raise your hand or ask one of the instructors to explain it to you. Then check your answers on the blackboard where it says SUBJECTS AND VERBS. Mark any sentences you have not done correctly and show your completed packet to one of the instructors. After discussing the results with you, the instructor will tell you what to do next. You'll do several exercises before you take the test on each skill. The instructors will explain any problem areas and give you extra worksheets if you need them. You may put your answers directly on the worksheets and exercises. Make sure you leave everything you have done in your folder each time you leave the lab. If, at any time, you need to work on a composition, or prepare for an English test, tell the lab instructor, and it's possible she will interrupt your

grammar review and help you with your current class assignment. We hope your association with the writing lab will be a pleasant one. However, we can help you only if you attend the lab sessions regularly. The lab staff want to explain any problem areas you don't understand and help you with your writing assignments. We will do our best, and we expect the same from you. Stop the tape and go to work on the subject/verb packet.

6. INDIVIDUALS DIFFER IN MORE THAN FINGERPRINTS.

All people have many things in common: All are part of the same human race. Paradoxically, the reverse is also true: Every person is a unique individual. No two people are alike. Everyone has a particular reason for being. To me, the supreme delight of teaching is to help a person, upon discovering himself, to be able to say, "I'm glad to be me! I'm an important person."

In one way, this point is related to self-concept. In another way, it is not. When I meet a student whose big problem is lack of self-confidence, I cannot begin to help until I find out his particular needs. An individual is just what the word denotes: separate, different. If a person's problems are unique, then so is his potential!

While we have a regular self-paced program in grammar and usage designed especially for PJC students, we studiously avoid letting the program run us--or run a student. We use a written set of materials as needed to help individuals. Some students, for example, have not yet learned to follow our simple instructions for pronoun case. With such students, the instructor tells the student the same information. For this person, the human element is necessary. There are others who learn much faster by simply studying the instruction sheets.

7. POSITIVE RESULTS PROCEED FROM WORTHWHILE ENDEAVORS.

Always! If you have never experienced helping a student transform F-writing into A-writing, then you have missed one of the great joys of teaching.

I think everyone would agree that such a result could be called positive. Of course, not all our students earn A's in English, but all our results are positive, nonetheless. I believe in what I'm doing, and I believe in the people I instruct.

On April 9, 1981, the day before the scheduled launch of the space shuttle, I read these words in a news story: "Nothing like it (the shuttle) has ever flown." I remembered back to 1973 when I was an editor in the Public Affairs Office at NASA in Houston. I was working the Skylab II mission. Even back then, when many people were still not at all convinced that Skylab would be a success, there was already a mock-up of the space shuttle in PAO. Several times I heard people-- reporters and tourists-- laugh in disbelief at the very idea of a space shuttle. No matter how incredulous people were, however, one gentleman-- whose name escapes me-- answered them all the same way: He said, "Of course it'll work! Yes, I'm very sure it will!" I could tell that he was 100 percent convinced, no matter what anyone else felt. I have always believed him. I strive to transmit that same kind of confidence to my students.

This has been my personal view of a functioning writing laboratory, my own part of the elephant.

1 Richard Bach, Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah (Dell Publishing Company, 1979), p. 58.